

**RE-ALIGNING NURSING AND MIDWIFERY PRACTICE TO ENHANCE
PROFESSIONALISM: ACTION RESEARCH PERSPECTIVE**

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ABSTRACT: *The quest of providing quality services to clients has witnessed the nursing/midwifery profession moving forward on a continuum from the point of dependence on other professions for its development. In not too distant past, nursing activities and textbooks were patterned and written respectively by non-nurses. This implied that such persons determined the scope of the nursing profession. Globally in recent years, there is a surge in nurses charting the course for the profession through research which is a tool for the growth and development of any profession. A large-scale survey showed a positive attitude towards research among British clinical nurses. In Nigeria, relatively few nurses are getting involved in research. Utilisation of research findings in nursing practice in Nigeria has been observed to be poor. Lack of implementation of research findings and theory render justification for action research because this paradigm is immediately assimilated and can be brought to bear in practice. Action research is an approach commonly used for the improvement of conditions and practices in a range of healthcare settings. This paradigm involves conducting participatory, systematic enquiries and taking action to improve practice, thus enhancing working environment and clients' outcome. The overarching aim of action research is to bring about change in specific contexts and empower practitioners. This attempts to close the gap between enquiry and implementation of the research findings. Therefore, in considering the professionalism of nursing and midwifery practice to meet the needs of our clients, action research approach is quite relevant because it offers a way of developing practice-based knowledge.*

KEYWORDS: Action research, Research utilisation, Participatory research in nursing and midwifery, Change, Professionalism

INTRODUCTION

Nursing profession has evolved through the ages (years) and being involved with caring, one could safely say that it is as old as man-kind. The quest for providing quality services to clients has witnessed this profession moving forward on a continuum from the point of dependence on other professions for its development. For instance, in a not too distant past, nursing activities and textbooks were patterned and written respectively by non-nurses. This implied that such persons determined the scope of the nursing profession. Globally in recent years, we have witnessed a surge in nurses charting the course for the profession through research which is a tool for the development of the body of knowledge that is peculiar to nursing. For example, an author stated the following,

‘we cannot overemphasise the importance of research to the growth and development of any profession most especially the nursing profession. Without research, we cannot develop new knowledge and without new knowledge, we will not grow as a profession’(Aina 2011). (Aina, 2011: vi)

Healthcare system is fast-paced thus delivery of quality nursing care that impacts patients/clients outcomes requires highly developed knowledge and skills. A stronger focus on evidence-based practice is fundamental to the delivery of effective nursing care. Although nursing research outputs have grown rapidly in recent years, however, the uptake of research findings into nursing practice is slow (Pearce and Rogers-Clark 2012). A low research base and inadequate research utilisation are seen as obstacles to acquiring credible professional status for nursing (Lacey 1994). The requirements for professional occupations is to possess and develop a relatively esoteric body of knowledge as a basis of practice (Freidson 1970). In the 1990s there had been some debate, both in Europe and in North America, about the extent to which nurses base their practice on research. A large-scale, generalisable survey showed a positive attitude towards research among British clinical nurses. In Nigeria, relatively few nurses are getting involved in research; though important for professional development, utilisation of research findings in nursing practice in Nigeria has been observed to be poor (Edet et al. 2011).

Barriers to the utilisation of research findings by nurses have been identified to include problem in interpreting and working with research products; lack of organisational support and lack of skills and motivation by some nurses (Thompson et al. 2015). As commented by Waterman (1994) the lack of implementation of research findings and theory renders justification for action research because this paradigm is immediately assimilated and can be brought to bear in practice (Waterman, 1994). In this paper, an attempt will be made to present an overview of action research including its philosophical underpinning, practical steps and rigour. Additionally, some previous studies in nursing and midwifery which utilised this paradigm successfully will be highlighted.

Overview of action research

Action research also known as Participatory Action Research (PAR), co-operative enquiry, action science, action learning and community-based study is an approach commonly used for the improvement of conditions and practices in a range of healthcare settings (Lingard et al. 2008). This paradigm involves healthcare practitioners which include nurses and midwives, conducting systematic enquiries for the purpose of improving their practice thus enhance their working environment and those of their clients (Koshy et al. 2011). The overarching aim of action research is to bring about change in specific contexts (Parkin 2009) and its strength lies in its focus on bringing about solutions to practical problems as well as the potential for the empowerment of practitioners through involving them in research and the consequent development and implementation of activities/actions (Koshy et al. 2011). In other words, action research by its nature, attempts to close the gap between enquiry (research) and implementation of the research findings. This design also closes the gap between theory and practice by placing value on the experiential basis of knowledge (Winter and Munn-Giddings, 2001; Webb, 1990). It ensures that all those involved in the research contribute to creative thinking about the issue at stake; decide on what is to be looked at; the method of enquiry and contribute to the action to be taken to solve the problem (Greenwood and Levin 2007).

Definitions of action research

Useful definitions of action research exist some of which will be considered in this text. As described by Reason and Bradbury (2006), action research is an approach used in designing studies which seek to inform and influence practice. Another definition states that 'action

research is a social research carried out by a team that encompasses a professional researcher and members of an organization, community, or network (stakeholders) who are seeking to improve the participants' situation. Action research promotes broad participation in the research process and supports action leading to a more just, sustainable or satisfying situation for the stakeholders' (Greenwood and Levin 2007).

Action research works on the premise that all those affected by a problem, should participate in the process of rigorous inquiry about the problem to acquire more information. This, in turn, is analysed by reflecting on the information to transform their understanding about the nature of their problem. This new set of understanding is then utilised to develop plans to solve the problem. The process just described is expected to help the people repudiate social myths, misconceptions and misrepresentations and, therefore, formulate more constructive analyses of their situation with the consequence of improved quality of life (Stringer, 1996).

Nature and development of action research

In the words of Kemmis and McTaggart (1988), action research is described as follows:

‘...a form of collective self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own social or educational practices, as well as their understanding of these practices and the situations in which these practices are carried out’ (Kemmis and McTaggart, p 5).

Winter and Munn-Giddings (2001) also described action research as a study of a social situation carried out by those involved in that situation in order to improve both their practice and the quality of their understanding.

Kurt Lewin and action research

Action research as a term was first used by Kurt Lewin, a social psychologist in 1946, in the post war America, in his quest for empowerment and justice for the oppressed (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988). Lewin's central thrust was in social change with particular emphasis on how to conceptualise and promote it (Greenwood and Levin, 2007). His concern included the need to solve social problems like discrimination against the minority groups because he believed that social and psychological researches did not improve the lives of people. Unfortunately, he did not live long enough to achieve his aspirations, however, other authors which include Carr, Kemmis and McTaggart; developed Lewin's work further (Waterman, 1994). As explained by Waterman, Lewin's work, as was common in his time, did not discuss epistemology and ontology explicitly. However, it was possible to draw conclusions from his philosophical expressions. It was highlighted that Lewin advocated social change through the education of both researchers and the research participants, believing that independence, equality and co-operation among the people would lead gradually to change through the process of action research (Carr and Kemmis 1986; Waterman, 1994).

Lewin conceptualised social change as a process which has three stages namely: dismantling former structures; changing structures and finally locking them back to a permanent structure (Greenwood and Levin, 2007). In addition, action research is positioned in the fact that power and social values facilitate change (Ketterer, 1980). This implies that through the process of action research, people get empowered by acquiring 'new knowledge' as a result of critiquing

their previously held knowledge/belief. In turn, the new knowledge influences their social value, thus posing a challenge to the status quo and this may facilitate change.

Furthermore, two fundamental ideas identified in Lewin's work as described by Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) were, group decision and commitment to improvement. These have become distinctive features in the process of action research and as stated by these authors:

‘those affected by planned changes have the primary responsibility for deciding on the courses of critically informed action which seem likely to lead to improvement and for evaluating the results of strategies tried out in practice’ (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988, p 6).

Thus, action research is described first, as a group activity. It works on the premise that change comes more easily when the people with a shared concern work in a group rather than as individuals, towards a solution (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988; Greenwood and Levin, 2007). Taken together, Kemmis and McTaggart argued that the approach is only action research when it is collaborative, though it is important to realise that the action research of the group is achieved through the critically examined action of individual group members. Subsequently, the participatory paradigm of this research design as well as its other characteristics is discussed.

The participatory paradigm of action research

The definitions of action research as stated earlier, emphasise the participatory nature of action research to bring about social change (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988; Waterman, 2007; Greenwood and Levin, 2007). Many action researchers have emphasised participation as the key point in this research approach. For example, Carr and Kemmis (1994) argue that transformations of social reality cannot be achieved without involving the social actors concerned. In this regard, the outside researcher and the insiders (participants) work together to achieve the desired goals. The involvement of the participants in the research process as co-researchers creates an opportunity for the use of individual capacities (Greenwood and Levin, 2007). Greenwood and Levin further maintained that having a diverse group of co-researchers brings a broader set of experiences and attitudes to the research process which could permit more creative solutions to develop. They further argued that action research must be constructed to gain strength from the creative potential in diversity of the participant group and not to create solutions to problems that unnecessarily reduce diversity. This stance, according to Dewey as cited by Greenwood and Levin (2007), is based on the philosophy that democracy is an on-going, collective process of social improvement in which all levels of the society should participate. Dewey emphasised that democracy should evolve through people's active involvement in making sense of their world and not through solutions imposed by powerful outsiders (Greenwood and Levin, 2007). Dewey also believed that because the community has a common stake in solutions, they can work through the problems together. This implies that change could be more easily achieved when people work together as a group. This belief is also held by Kemmis and McTaggart as already mentioned in the previous paragraph.

In action research, there is no distinction between the researcher and the participants. All participants are co-researchers and co-subjects (Reason, 1988; Winter and Munn-Giddings, 2001). However, where there is an outside researcher, s/he acts as the facilitator. An outside researcher refers to a professional researcher who is not a member of the community from

where the participants are drawn (McNiff and Whitehead 2006). This paradigm does not view the subjects as passive in the research process, but empowers them to act on their behalf as active participants in change. Empowerment is achieved through guiding the participants to identify or have a better understanding of their situation and, thus, mutually resolve problems that confront them. This consequently leads to emancipation (Winter, 1989; Waterman, Webb and Williams, 1995; Stringer, 1996; Greenwood and Levin, 2007). Emancipation implies that there is an alteration from the initial situation of the participants or community members to a direction of a better and more self-managing and sustainable state (Koshy et al. 2011; Greenwood and Levin 2007). An attempt is made to guide the participants to understand the magnitude of the problem they are facing and this understanding is expected to motivate them to collaboratively develop plan of action to solve this problem.

Commitment to improvement/change

The second concern of action research as identified in Lewin's work is that it is committed to the improvement of practices, situations and understandings, therefore, it is underpinned on the view of truth and action as socially construed (Carr and Kemmis 1986). This means that entities are not fixed but that they are created, developed, modified and are capable of changing within the process of interaction (Haralambos et al. 2008). This view corroborates the position of Gadamer as cited by Waterman (1994) who suggested that certain perspectives held by people have been developed over time and considered better, until different perspectives are put forward which add to and develop further understanding. This idea is based on philosophical hermeneutics, which is a way of representing the notion of interpretive understanding (Gadamer 1970; Denzin and Lincoln 2000). Gadamer further argued that understanding is not an isolated activity of human beings, but a basic structure of our experiences in life which is shaped through socio-historically inherited bias and prejudice. He described this situation as tradition and went on to explain that tradition is not something that is external, objective and past, rather it is a force that enters into all our understanding. It, therefore, follows that tradition shapes our understanding of the world and how we see ourselves (Gallagher 1992). This suggests that tradition can pose as an obstacle to the change that action research aims at. Although Gadamer (1975) emphasised that philosophical hermeneutics is not a problem-solving method, rather it is a means of clarifying conditions in which understanding takes place. I view this stance as an important characteristic which is relevant to action research project in order to guide the process of facilitating change or improvement of situations, practices and understandings. In support of the foregoing, action research authors, for example Kemmis and McTaggart (1988); Winter and Munn-Giddings (2001) argued that action research requires that people put their practices, ideas and assumptions about their situation to test by gathering compelling evidence which could convince them that their previous practices, ideas and assumptions were wrong. This involves the participants making critical analysis of their situation.

Knowledge generated from action research inquiry should improve or change the circumstances that had oppressed the people. Greenwood and Levin (2007) posit that the democratic nature of action research supports the creation of new knowledge that has a potentially liberating effect. This is supported by the idea that the inquiry process in action research aims at solving problems which are important to the participants. Therefore, the outcome of such an inquiry process should be knowledge that increases the participants' ability to have control over their own situations (Greenwood and Levin, 2007). This area of concern in action research appears to be consistent with Freire's (1970) concept of

conscientisation which argues that inquiry process should aim at shaping knowledge that is relevant to action built on critical understanding of historical and political contexts within which the participants act. He further stated that the participants should be able to use the emerged knowledge to support the enhancement of their goals (Freire 1970;Greenwood and Levin 2007).

Action Research Process

The action research process was first described by Kurt Lewin as a spiral of steps, each consisting of a circle of planning, action and fact-finding about the result of the action (Lewin 1946). Kemmis and McTaggart further elaborated Lewin's description by saying that each circle is composed of planning, action, observation, reflection and drawing up a revised plan (Kemmis and McTaggart 1988). Generally, action research consists of a spiral of cycles involving the interaction of research, action and evaluation. Only one of these three strands in the spiral may be dominant at each phase, although it interacts with the other two (Carr and Kemmis 1986;Hart and Bond 1995). Some other authors have described the process of action research in slightly different ways but basically involving planning, action and evaluation. The description by another author consisted of the following steps in the cycle (Somekh 2006):

1. Collection of data about the topic of investigation
2. Analysis and interpretation of those data
3. Planning and introduction of action strategies to bring positive change
4. Evaluation of those changes through further data collection
5. Analysis and interpretation of the further data collected.

Waterman, Harker, MacDonald and Waterman (2005) further described action research cycle as having the following phases. The first phase involves problem identification which entails fact-finding. It is exploratory and may include a literature review and other sources to gather information about the problem. The second phase is the planning stage and is concerned with setting objectives and developing strategies to solve the problems identified in the preceding phase. The third is the action phase, in which activities are undertaken to meet the action objectives and thus solve the problem. In the fourth phase, the result is critically reflected upon and fed back into the action research cycle which is continuous (Fig. 1).

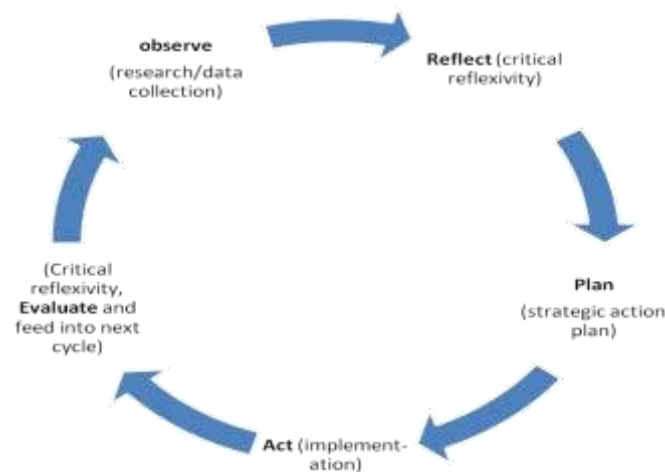


Fig. 1: A Typical Action Research Cycle

Practical steps in conducting action research

These steps involve the following and should conventionally follow ethical approval by the relevant 'gate-keepers' to carry out the research.

Phase 1: Fact-finding

This step consists of two major components which are: (i) constitution of the action research group and (ii) fact-finding or needs assessment.

- This phase involves selection and facilitation of the Action Research Group (ARG) otherwise known as co-researchers. The reason for selecting people to form the action research group is based on the principle that action research procedure starts by getting a group of people together who are involved with the situation of interest in different ways. These people should demonstrate their willingness by volunteering to participate in the research for their own purposes after an explanation of the topic by the facilitator and what action research entails (Winter and Munn-Giddings 2001). The ARG would be empowered through sensitisation to identify their problems and eventually work as change agents in their community. By sensitisation, it means that they would be made more aware of the problem at stake through the process of co-learning with the researcher. As explained further, sensitisation is not definitive or directive but it gives a general sense of reference and merely suggests directions (Hammersley and Atkinson 1990). Put differently, from the process of sensitisation, people would know their turf, and have the imagination to collectively envision a desirable new state and attract others who share that vision (Wadsworth 1998). This means that sensitisation leads to knowledge which increases the people's control over their situation. Such knowledge is relevant to action and is shaped based on critical understanding of their situation. This whole process begins with 'sensitisation' (awareness creation), during which people critically acquire an understanding of their circumstances, which is required prior to purposeful action, and was first described by Freire (1970) as 'conscientisation' (Freire, 1970; Greenwood and Levin, 2007). Furthermore, the nature of action research is discussed with the ARG. This includes the rudiments of action research and methods of

data generation as well as research ethics. The purpose of the foregoing is to equip members of the ARG to function meaningfully as co-researchers.

- Needs assessment or fact-finding about the problem is done by the researcher and the co-researchers. This will be done through in-depth individual and group interviews. There may be need for existing records on the problem and survey to emphasise the burden of the problem. At the end of this, critical reflection is collaboratively done on the data generated. These are documented in field notes by all the participants and the researcher. Data from this source is fed into the next phase.

Phase 2 Planning

In this phase, strategies are developed towards solving the problems identified in phase 1. This involves setting action objectives, making decisions about interventions/actions and critically reflecting on them. Data generated at this level are fed into the action phase.

Phase 3 Action

The interventions/actions are carried out and evaluated. The findings are critically reflected upon and the data generated are fed back into the next planning phase of the action research spiral. This process continues until some elements of change are identified, although Winter and Munn-Giddings (2001) state that a successful action research does not stop because it looks forward to further developments. At this point, the co-researchers/community should have been empowered to continue with actions and planning to sustain the change.

Phase 4: Reflection/Evaluation, Final Phase, Closure and Withdrawal

Unlike the traditional researches, action research does not aim at closure. This is because it assumes that all answers are provisional and are open to critique and change as contexts and understanding develop (McNiff and Whitehead, 2006:30). Closure implies that the researchers have found the final answers to bring about a change. The process in this final phase should include consolidation of what has been learnt and review of experiences. It would be helpful to evaluate the action research by asking the participants to discuss the most important outcome of the group, as well as their plan to sustain actions undertaken. It is usual that following the disengagement of the facilitator from the field, the group continues to meet to ensure that the change is sustained. It is suggested that the researcher should express gratitude to each participant for making the research a success; and, thereafter, start distancing her/himself from the group (Koch and Kralik 2006).

Having highlighted the steps of action research, the rigour of this paradigm will now be discussed.

Rigour in action research

Although action research is seen as the standard research design that promotes democracy in research which motivates people to bring about a change that solves their problem, it has

been criticised by some scholars as lacking the rigours of scientific inquiry, thus questioning the validity in action research (Stringer 2007; Winter and Munn-Giddings 2001).

Validity of action research

Critics have raised concerns about the validity of action research findings (Koshy et al, 2011). The Critics further question the objectivity of data generated when people are researching into their practice. Action researchers have acknowledged these concerns and devised ways of ensuring validity of this type of research. As pointed out by Waterman (1998), there is the tendency for action researchers to depend on the perspectives of validity from qualitative or ethnographic research. She argues that although the categories of validity in qualitative research can be applied to action research for example, triangulation, these only give a partial picture of what makes action research valid. Therefore, it is suggested that the qualitative categories be complemented by dialectical, critical and reflexive categories which emphasise the distinctiveness of action research (Waterman 1998).

Dialectical validity describes the approach of action research to explore a problem in an attempt to resolve tensions or contradictions with the aim of improving the quality of the lives of people (Waterman 1998). Critical validity explains the nature of action research which views the attempt to bring about a positive change in people's situation as a moral responsibility. This is achieved through the inclusivity or the participatory approach which is aimed at encouraging the subjects to be co-researchers into their problem and eventually develop a sense of ownership. The third parameter for assessing the validity of action research as suggested by Waterman is reflexivity (Waterman 1998). This explains the influence that the researcher exerts on the study based on h/her background. The meanings and description that qualitative researchers attach to events are products of their culture, social background and personal experiences (Denscombe 2010). This is contrary to the stance of positivists who view the world from the perspective of objectivity (Denscombe 2010).

Reflexivity has been described by action researchers as a means of enhancing the validity of action research, for example, in the words of Waterman:

‘...the questioning attitude, the active search for opposing perspectives, the movements between theory, research and practice, and the multiple researchers and methods should reassure readers that action has been taken to minimise the difficulty of vested interests’ (Waterman, 1998, p.104).

In broad terms, it is important to ensure the accuracy of the data generated and used as evidence in action research because this affects the conclusions that could be drawn. For this purpose, sharing data with the action research group and triangulation in data collection, ensure a good quality of data (Koshy et al 2011). Triangulation is described as the process of obtaining several perspectives about the issue under study (Mason 2002). This process also allows for contrasting views about the situation (Hopkins 2002). The whole process of triangulation in the sources of data provides some degree of authenticity to the overall data (Koshy et al 2011). These sources include interview transcripts, questionnaire responses, observations and field diaries. In addition to the foregoing, the process of critical reflection further strengthens the validity of action research. This process involves the feedback of data to the action research group members for deliberation in order to inform the planning or re-planning phase (Waterman et al. 2001).

Reliability of action research

Reliability refers to the extent to which the research instrument is consistent to produce the same result on different occasions (Denscombe, 2010). In the context of action research, data could either be qualitative or quantitative depending on the focus of the study. If the study involves quantitative tool like questionnaire, the conventional process of assessing reliability of research instrument applies, thus, such instrument must be reliable (Koshy et al, 2011).

Generalizability

Action research may not be based on statistical procedures and thus its findings might not be generalizable on a larger population. Nonetheless, it is found that lessons learnt from a single action research project are as illuminating as outcomes from other forms of research (Winter and Munn-Giddings 2005). Therefore, action research can uncover a wide variety of issues in a situation which can provide insights to a variety of other situations. In other words, generalizability is possible through application of the project to similar situations (Koshy et al 2011).

Evidence of some successful utilisation of the action research in nursing and midwifery practice

- Reference is hereby made to some studies by nurses and midwives who used action research approach to influence practice positively, thereby improving patient/client outcomes.
- Waterman, (1994) studied '*Meaning of visual impairment: Developing Ophthalmic Nursing Care*'. This action research project led to the improvement of posturing post-operatively in patients with retinal repair (Waterman 1994; Waterman et al. 2005).
- She further studied '*Intervening in the process of stigmatisation: challenging social inequalities in the context of HIV/AIDS home-based care in Kenya*'. The outcome was also favourable (Waterman et al. 2007).
- Esienumoh, (2011) worked on '*prevention of maternal mortality: An action research in a rural South-eastern community of Nigeria*'. Community members became empowered to take action to prevent maternal mortality. This was evidenced in the community Health Centre that was abandoned for about 15 years becoming revitalised as maternity services commenced again in the course of the project (Esienumoh 2011).

Limitations of action research

The process of action research is time-consuming and as a result of that, there may be attrition of members of the AR group. Another limiting factor is the context-specificity of the action research.

CONCLUSION

Nursing/Midwifery is a relatively developing profession and so requires not only research but also the utilisation of research findings in meeting the needs of the consumers of nursing

services. Dearth in the utilisation of research has been observed in nursing and midwifery practice; action research provides an 'on the spot' utilisation of research findings which can assist in changing practice and democratizing inquiry. Evidence of success of AR in the context of nursing/midwifery (including Nigeria) has been discussed. Therefore, in the process of re-aligning nursing and midwifery practice to meet the needs of our clients, action research perspectives should be given due consideration. It is recommended that there should be collaboration of academics and clinicians in nursing and midwifery with regard to utilisation of this paradigm to bring about practical changes in practice, thus promote professionalism and improve client/patient outcomes.

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